

Cleanup 'in sight' for Libby

EPA announces way to remove insulation, soils

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HELENA — It wasn't the public health emergency declaration many had been waiting for, but the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced Thursday that it had found a legal way to remove asbestos-contaminated insulation and soils from

homes and businesses in Libby. "This means that there's an end in sight," said Libby resident LeRoy Thom. "The community is going to be cleaned up, and the community is going to be able to go on once this is done."

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Thom worked for 17 years at the W.R. Grace and Co. vermiculite mine in Libby that has since been blamed for hundreds of illnesses and at least 200 deaths due to exposure to asbestos that contaminated the vermiculite ore. W.R. Grace bought the vermiculite mine in 1963 and operated it until it closed in 1990. Zonolite insula-

tion was one of the primary products produced using vermiculite from the mine, and hundreds of Libby houses are insulated with Zonolite.

In addition, many in Libby used vermiculite from the mine to condition the soils in their gardens.

EPA Administrator Christine Whitman made the decision to remove Zonolite from Libby-area homes and businesses early Thursday, and regional officials outlined their plans to about 150 Libby residents during a town meeting later in the evening. The insulation and soil removal will be done as part of the federal agency's five-year cleanup operation for the town, which is expected to be

officially listed as a Superfund site later this year.

Gov. Judy Martz and all three members of Montana's congressional delegation praised the decision in statements issued Thursday afternoon.

"This announcement truly shows the commitment that our administration and the Bush administration have to the people of Libby," Martz said. Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., said in a statement that the announcement brings "peace of mind for homeowners ... hope for the future."

Sen. Conrad Burns, R-Mont., said

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he was "pleased to see the people of Libby get this support."

And Rep. Denny Rehberg, R-Mont., said in a phone interview: "They're setting aside bureaucratic process of making decisions and going in and actually helping."

For the past several months, the EPA has been debating whether to declare a public health emergency for Libby, previously thought to be the only way for the agency to legally gain authority to remove both the insulation and contaminated soils from private homes and businesses. The emergency declaration had become a contentious issue, however, and officials said Whitman's decision Thursday allows the agency to clean up private properties without waiting out a lengthy battle.

"The public health emergency carries with it a whole lot of other implications," said EPA Region VIII Regional Administrator Jack McGraw.

McGraw said Libby is the only place in the United States where people were exposed to asbestos from so many sources. Because of the cumulative effect of asbestos exposure on people's health, he said, it makes sense to remove any source of asbestos during cleanup operations there, including getting rid of asbestos-contaminated insulation and soils.

Dr. Brad Black, Lincoln County health officer and director of the local asbestos-related diseases clinic, said he is concerned that, without the emergency declaration, the town still doesn't have full assurance that the cleanup will be completed.

"We were told (by Whitman earlier this year) that Libby had to have a special declaration of a public health emergency in order to come into private establishments," Black said. He added: "What we'd like to see is to have this formally placed in writing —

who will be the final legal authority and take ultimate responsibility."

Thom said he wasn't particularly concerned that a public health emergency was not declared. "This will be a blessing for the community in the long term — and, now, the not-so-long term," Thom said.

Gayla Benefield, a Libby activist who has been pushing for the emergency declaration, called the new plan "a start."

"This isn't everything that we wanted, but it's a giant step," Benefield said. She added later: "This is all new science, and I think they've come up with some of the best possible solutions for the circumstances."

Many of those in attendance at the public meeting said were worried about what would happen to their homes and whether they could be assured their homes were clean when the EPA left. Paul Peronard, who supervises the emergency cleanup operations that have been ongoing in Libby since 1999, said there is no way that every trace of asbestos can be removed from a home, but that the agency will do its best to reasonably ensure that homes and businesses are safe and do not present future exposure risks.

There will, of course, be those who refuse to allow the EPA to sample or clean up their properties. Jim Christiansen, who will supervise cleanup for the town's Superfund operations, said he expects most people will allow the agency onto their property by the time the cleanup is done.

Those who don't want to be involved with the EPA will not be able to come back 10 years down the road and ask to have their Zonolite attic insulation removed, he said. "I'll have a frank conversation with those people, and say, look, here's what you stand to gain," Christiansen said. "This is the one chance you get."

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